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Transformative Learning in the Foreign Language Classroom: Connecting the Past with the Future Through the History of the Atomic Bomb

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Abstract

This paper will describe the learning impact of course materials, including a book about the atomic bomb and a special guest lecture by an atomic bomb survivor, on Japanese students, who were born over 50 years after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Final reflection papers written by the students as part of their coursework are the data source providing insight into their learning experiences during the Intensive English course where the materials were used. Crafting a story using the voice of the students keeps their lived experience in the forefront while simultaneously engaging the researcher's reflexivity during the interpretive process. This paper is a record of practice of the teacher-researcher's choice of material, teaching method and the students' response to the Intensive English course.

1. Introduction

The memory of the dropping of the first atomic bomb in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 is at risk of disappearing into the dusty archives of history without concerted efforts to bring this important part of world history to the attention of the people from time to time. Survivors of the atomic bomb, or *hibakusha*, play an important role in reminding us of the devastation caused by the atomic bomb through their stories about their experiences during this terrible time. Although their stories can be difficult for them to tell and consequently difficult to listen to, their efforts to

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provide a living link to the past devastation are essential to keeping the discussion about the danger of nuclear weapons from fading.

Ms. Koko Kondo, the youngest surviving *hibakusha*, speaks around the world about her experiences in both English and Japanese. Her story is unique in that she does not focus on the devastation and hardship of her life as a survivor, though her stories are heartbreaking, but on the forgiveness she found as a 10-year old girl when she came face to face with Captain Robert Lewis, the co-pilot of the *Enola Gay* when they both appeared on the television program *This is Your Life* in 1955 (Joseph, 2016).

After attending one of her talks and recognizing my own apathy about the history of the atomic bomb, I became concerned about the youth of Japan. Coupled with the uncomfortable feeling of not providing enough challenge for the students in the first semester, I decided to create a course that followed the model of experiential learning and focused on the theme of the history of the atomic bomb. Using the Lexile Measure as a guide, I chose a young adult non-fiction book that would challenge the students' current reading level and planned to scaffold the content for them as they embarked on this new learning style to prepare for their encounter with Ms. Kondo's powerful story.

2. Experiential Learning

John Dewey (1916), responding to the fashion in which students usually sit quietly in ordered rows in their classrooms, and politely wait for teachers to give them instruction, stated, “. . . give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results” (p.167). Providing space for the learners to explore their boundaries and discover their abilities allows students to create their own learning experiences and actively involves them in the learning process. One of the main principles in experiential learning is that *experience* plays a central role. It is the teacher's responsibility to guide the students towards making connections with prior understanding to attend to the task at hand (Kohonen, 2001). As students negotiate through their learning experience they learn life-skills and critical thinking. Kurt Lewin's 1951 model of experiential learning begins with a learning experience followed by reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing the implications in new situations (Kohonen, 2001, p.24). This basic structure forms the basis of many reflective inquiry and action research models used today. The significance of this reflective cycle in a learning situation is that it provides a framework for making meaning from the experience. Some scholars argue that true learning does not take place until it is reflected upon.

3. Crafting Stories and Phenomenology

Stories are a powerful means of communication. They keep culture and history alive, keep and create societies through shared experiences and commonalities. Stories connect people. Phenomenology studies human experience from the first person point of view, thus does not seek cause and effect. It seeks understanding and “understanding begins when something addresses us” (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 299 in Crowther, 2017). Delving into human experience without a precise and pre-determined plan allows for unexpected and sometimes profound insights when the experience leads the investigation. Hermeneutic phenomenology in particular is a creative and intuitive approach to research (Crowther, et al., 2017). There is no right or wrong method and no strict, to-the-letter protocol that must be adhered to since the researcher is not trying to prove something specific. The objective of the inquiry is to reveal “essential, yet often forgotten, dimensions of human experience in ways that compel attention and provoke further thinking” (Crowther et al., 2017, p.827). The researcher’s experience and backgrounds also influence the inquiry. It is in this way, the investigation is reflexive.

Crowther (2017) stresses when crafting stories in a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, that data is worked *with* and not *on* and provides steps to follow when crafting stories from transcripts. Labov’s 6 Basic Elements of Storytelling also provides a clear framework when crafting stories. To support the flow of the story, especially when combining multiple lived experiences, Crowther suggests adding words, providing context and correcting grammar as necessary to keep the story flowing. Staying as close to the experience as possible is what the researcher concentrates on. By doing so, the researcher immerses herself [sic] into the data, begins a dialogic interaction with it and uses imagination to write a story that describes the experience as lived by the teller or tellers with the intention to generate further conversation.

4. Final Reflection Prompt

At the end of every semester, on the last day of class, I ask students to think about what they experienced in the classroom. I write my own reflection of the course so students have something to respond to. This is also when I usually reveal the syllabus design to them. The students responded to the following reflection prompt during the final day of the semester:

Today is the last day of our Intensive English experience. That means we have had about 80 classes together. EIGHTY CLASSES! I have had the great

pleasure to watch you grow from nervous freshman who followed directions to the best of your ability to young adults who now have the ability to think on your own and express your thoughts and feelings in English

Your journey into the world is just beginning and it has been my hope that you discover how English can help you see beyond the horizon of Japan. It is with this idea that I designed the syllabus for Intensive English. To be honest, I was not satisfied with the content during the first semester. I didn't think I challenged you and some of the comments from the final reflection papers confirmed my fears. The course was much too easy for you so I decided to drastically change it.

It was my good fortune to meet Koko Kondo, whose life mission is to tell the story of her life as an atomic bomb survivor and her message of peace and forgiveness to the world in Japanese and in English. Her speech made me concerned that the history of the atomic bomb was fading from the minds of the young people of Japan. I chose our book, *Bomb: The Race to Build-and Steal-the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* to awaken your interest in your history, challenge your perspectives, and put your English skills into action.

So that is what I had in mind when I designed the course, but what really happened in the classroom? Take some time to think about your experiences this semester and write about [them] as your final reflection.

By weaving together the strands of individual student experiences, a single holistic story has been crafted to reveal the lived experiences of the students in two Intensive English classes. After dwelling with the data, the voice of a student who struggled with confidence in English ability and feeling a bit overwhelmed with the course emerged. The collective voice of the students is expressed from this point of view.

5. The Story

When I joined this class, I was very nervous. I didn't have friends in Intensive English and I was worried because I couldn't speak English well and my pronunciation was bad, but everyone was kind and listened to me carefully so I could say what I wanted to say.

The subjects in the first semester such as trips, children's stories and my own English learning were easy and fun. I could memorize what I had to say and prepare for the tasks easily. I felt comfortable which meant I didn't have to speak English or think about anything seriously. There wasn't a lot of homework and there were only a few opportunities to speak in English. I enjoyed that, but I suspected my English

skills could be better. I learned some things though. Storytelling was a bit difficult because I didn't have an idea of "no reading" when making a presentation and it was a good experience for me to speak in front of my classmates and teacher. I also enjoyed learning pronunciation through singing songs and it has become an important memory of my campus life, but I wasn't really satisfied with the content of the first semester.

However, IE changed in the second semester. When I learned that we would be reading *Bomb: The Race to Build-and Steal-the World's Most Dangerous Weapon*, I felt nervous because I knew I couldn't read such a difficult book and I wasn't interested in events that happened such a long time ago. Actually, I was so surprised and so disappointed when I learned that we had to read a book about the first atomic bomb. I didn't want to read *Bomb* for homework because it included a lot of difficult words and the relationships among the characters was very complex. I couldn't completely understand the story. The content of the class became so hard, it was difficult to think about one theme, and we had much more homework. We had homework every other day. We had to read one chapter, write the summary, and write in our reading journal. I couldn't do it. I especially didn't like writing the summary. I couldn't summarize well so I thought I didn't have the ability to do it and stopped. It was too hard and I didn't have enough time. I just wanted to escape.

Some of the students read the book with all their might so I had no excuse for being lazy. My classmates helped me understand *Bomb*. The story was very difficult for me, so I couldn't understand it without them. I don't think I could have kept up with this class without group work. Group work is so important!! My group members made me realize that unless I practiced summarizing, my summarizing skills wouldn't improve. I felt bad. Because of my laziness, I had troubled my group members so I changed my attitude and started reading and summarizing *Bomb*. And then, little by little, I began to feel that reading books in English is interesting. When I studied hard, the class became so fun. My group members not only helped me with summarizing the chapters in the book, but also connecting it with my life. I didn't think I could ever understand the story, but gradually I started understanding and the more I could understand the historical circumstances in the book it became exciting for me and motivated me.

This class meets three times a week so we meet more times than other students and my classmates were very unique and have personality. Group work and having good relationships helped to create the common feeling of "we want to study with everyone by making sure everyone can keep up with the class." Some students were not so serious. They complained to the teacher and said things like, "Teacheer, you give us too much homework." and "It's too hard. I couldn't read everything for today." But these words never destroyed the atmosphere of the class. Some students

often said the teacher makes them do too much work, but they are really joking. Actually, everyone in this class is so earnest, so I think everyone enjoyed studying hard in the second semester. Besides, there were a lot of unique students in this class. I've never belonged in a class where someone would burst into singing or start dancing or something. It's a rare thing in Japan, but that's what made us who we are and I found my good friends in this class. I love my group members!!

The teacher planned many things to help us understand and the class became exciting. When she helped us summarize the main topic on the whiteboard, I was able to understand the contents of the story easily and could enjoy discussing it with my group members. I had never experienced this kind of class where we spend almost the whole class discussing so I was nervous and hesitated to share my opinion in the beginning. However, gradually, I could share with the others and realized that it was very interesting.

She gave every member of the class many chances to participate which was also very exciting because we were able to find a variety of opinions and expressions. We were assigned difficult and serious tasks many times, but somehow she thought we could do it so she gave them to us. And we could! One of the tasks was a group presentation task and the content was a little difficult so we were not sure how to proceed, but she gave us some advice to consider what we should talk about and thanks to that I could deepen my ties to the topic. We each had our own responsibility for the group presentation so I worked hard for my group members. I enjoyed my group's presentation very much. I owe the success of my group's presentation to the book *Bomb*.

I was anxious at first about understanding what the teacher was saying in an all-English class, but her English was very clear and everyone supported each other. She tried very hard to understand my English when I asked questions, even when it was so bad and I used a little Japanese, she never abandoned me, so I was very happy and looked forward to this class every time because the teacher and my classmates were fantastic. I felt sorry for her sometimes because we irritated her. I think it's because we didn't acknowledge her lessons and I want to apologize for that and thank her for not deserting us.

The teacher told us to make a link between the content of the book and the present situation or our experiences. I found that I could do it when I tried and thanks to that the *Bomb* story became familiar with me. At first, almost all of my group members hesitated to speak English and sometimes no one spoke in my group because we didn't have confidence. However, as we continued, the discussion became powerful and meaningful. I was really happy when we could discuss such a difficult topic in English. It was very difficult to explain the world's situation of the war in English, but by gaining knowledge about the past situation, I could connect

them and I could understand current situations. I noticed that I didn't know too much about the war and that I have to be interested in history and the current events in Japan and in the world. I wasn't interested in difficult problems such as war, the election, global warming, etc. and didn't really have any opinions about those things, but I noticed that I could have opinions by learning about these problems deeply and by reading the materials in class carefully. Of course, I'm Japanese, so I have read about and heard the Japanese side of World War II and the damage of the atomic bomb, but *Bomb* is a story from the American side and also from the developers of the atomic bomb. It was interesting to know USA, Russia and German side.

Our group presented about spies. I learned these spies worked hard during the war. I had never known about it until reading our text. I had thought the past is the past and foreigners' way of think is different from us. However, after reading *Bomb* I changed my ridiculous opinion.

These days young people like us don't know about war very much, but through IE class I could learn about the fear of war and the sadness more deeply. Before this class, I had never read a book like *Bomb*. This book was written in real English and although it was difficult, it was intensive and attractive. In high school we read texts to educate Japanese English learners in English classes or studied the history of World War II from the Japanese side. *Bomb* didn't just teach us about war, it contained the feelings and emotions of many people in detail so it was really easy to understand and was interesting so I wanted to know about the next story. Thanks to this book I could improve my reading skills and learn many words naturally. In addition, I learned what we should consider as Japanese. So I'm very grateful for learning not only English skills, but also what peace is. It made me think that we Japanese must promote world peace. If I hadn't taken this class, I couldn't think about peace and wouldn't have the opportunity to think deeply about war. My hometown is Hiroshima where the first atomic bomb was dropped, but before I took this class, I didn't try to learn or think about what happened on August 6th much. Whatever the reason was for the teacher to choose this book, it was a precious experience for me to talk with our American teacher about the atomic bomb.

Every class was a great experience, but the most impressive one was when Ms. Koko Kondo came to tell us her story of being a survivor of the atomic bomb. I've never listened to a speech like hers before. Her speech was in English, but I could understand everything and enjoy it. Her speaking speed, body language, volume and smile helped me. I noticed these are very, very important. I want to become a person who can speak like her not only in English, but also in Japanese! Her experience was very interesting and her outlook was very courageous. It made me want to learn the history of Hiroshima more. She was so cool!!! I got inspiration from her

because if she couldn't speak English, she couldn't share her special life. I was encouraged to study English harder to express my opinion in public, especially toward the world.

My listening skills improved during this year, I could find my growth. I can't understand everything the teacher says, but I'm not nervous anymore because I noticed my possibility. When this class first started, I was so nervous because I couldn't understand what the teacher said and often had to ask my classmates for help. However, I can understand about 70% of what the teacher says now. Maybe she doesn't feel satisfied with that, but it is a huge step for me.

I gave the two presentations in class with confidence. The reason that I could do so was because I didn't give up. I know that now. I thought that I would naturally become a person who could speak English, but I learned that wasn't correct. Many people often say that after studying abroad they were changed, but I know that simply studying abroad didn't change them, their efforts changed them. I have to change me by myself so I started to think that I want to go abroad.

After taking part in Intensive English, my thoughts about studying abroad changed for the better. After taking part in presentations, I thought that I want to speak to many people and learn about cultural differences in foreign countries. I want to give better presentations in front of lots of people. I was not good at speaking in front of people, but I will never give up the challenge. To be honest, I haven't decided my future, but thanks to this IE class I will continue studying English so I can be ready for my dream.

When I saw *Bomb* for the first time, it looked so serious and was such a thick book, I thought we wouldn't be able to finish it in one term, but we did it! I could get a sense of achievement. I have never read such a book in English in my whole life. At first, it took one hour to read a chapter and I didn't like the book, but now I'm glad I read it. As I continued to read the book, I found that the speed of reading became fast and eventually I could read a chapter in half an hour. I took the TOEIC test to learn how my English skills changed since joining IE and realized that this class improved my English skills. My TOEIC score improved about 100 points. Summarizing and group discussions developed my speaking and thinking skills. This semester was a little difficult, but we improved our skills.

I'm sure that this IE class is the most interesting class I have ever experienced. It reminded of the fun of English and got me interested in English again. When I was in high school I started to hate English because of so much daily English, so I put English away when I became an undergraduate, but as long as I took this class I was reminded that I want to be in an English environment and that I want to improve my English skills. We need classes like these in Japan where we can read the textbook, discuss with other people, and give presentations about what we learned.

This IE class was the kind of class I had hoped for when I entered university. This was one of the biggest memories in KGU. IE gave me an unforgettable, great experience...but I still really wanted a pizza party! (Just kidding).

6. Discussion

The students in their story, show how they made connections with their history to help guide them with their future. They developed an interest in current world events by researching and learning about their past. During class discussions, we found that the more we looked into the events that happened during World War II, the more relevant current news events became. The students give us clear insight into what they need and what they want as learners.

It was recently reported (September 14, 2017) in the *Japan Times*, that four teenage boys vandalized Chibichirigama cave, the historical site where civilians took their own lives at the end of World War II, in Okinawa, Japan. Importantly, the boys did not appear to have any connection with their historical past. It is concerning that though these boys were taught about their local history in school, they seemed unable to make the connection to themselves.

Unfortunately, this disconnect between the past and present, and consequently the future, these young men showed is not an isolated incident. In 2015, NHK conducted a survey (NHK, 2015) focusing on the attitude of people in Japan regarding nuclear weapons. The results were disappointing to say the least. Surprisingly, only 68.6 percent of the people in Hiroshima City knew the date the atomic bomb was dropped in Hiroshima. Tallying the results from the whole country resulted in merely 29.5 percent of people who could answer that August 6, 1945 was the answer to the question, “Do you know the day when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima?”

Rather than looking for blame perhaps we can look for solutions by engaging the young people of Japan in a dialogue about their history and showing them how to make the connections between the past and present. They are after all, the future and we must do our best to prepare them for it.

We may even surprise ourselves by learning about our own beliefs and capabilities as we listen carefully to what these young people have to say and the lessons they teach us.

Max van Manen writes that phenomenological projects and methods often have transformative effect on the researcher (1990, p.163) and I’ve found this to be true. Crafting a story using the words of the students has brought me closer to their experience of my teaching and they have taught me how I can learn to become a better teacher. They have shown me the power of experiential learning and they have

shown me they are not bound by culture. They are not the frightened inward-looking youth of Japan depicted in newspapers (Editorial, 2013). They are strong, compassionate, intelligent youth certainly capable of becoming globalized citizens while remaining uniquely Japanese.

7. Conclusion

The students who participated in the Intensive English course share the impact of the course materials and their response to the type of learning they engaged in. They were clearly moved to action, taking charge of their learning and their futures. This transformative experience is based on one fundamental principle: listen to each other. The dynamic Koko Kondo learned this as a 10-year old girl, when she set aside her presuppositions and listened to Captain Robert Lewis. This moment changed her life and her outlook on life. When we listen to her story, we become transformed. What can we learn from the story the students tell us?

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